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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: TFUS01: AMBASSADOR THANKS ITALY IN HIGH-LEVEL

MEDIA EVENT

Sensitive but Unclassified, not for Internet publication.

¶1. (U) Summary: Ambassador Spogli publicly thanked Italy for its hurricane Katrina relief during a September 9 visit to Italy's Department of Civil Protection. In an unexpected move, Prime Minister Berlusconi, Defense Minister Antonio Martino, and many other top-level officials also attended the event. End summary.

¶2. (U) Ambassador Spogli visited the headquarters of the Department of Civil Protection--Italy's FEMA-equivalent and the main coordinator of Italy's aid flight to Little Rock--September 9 to publicly thank the GOI and the Italian people for their support in the wake of hurricane Katrina. The event included a photo op with the crew of the C-130 who delivered the relief supplies and a tour, led by Civil Protection Director Guido Bertolaso, of the Department's ultra-modern command center in the outskirts of Rome. At the end of his visit, the Ambassador made a statement of thanks in Italian to a large assembly of local and international journalists.

¶3. (U) Although this event was originally planned as a simple thank-you call on Director Bertolaso, it quickly took on much greater significance. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, Defense Minister Antonio Martino, and other top-level officials joined in and their presence helped draw even more attention to the Ambassador's words of gratitude.

¶4. (U) In his remarks, the Ambassador thanked the Department of Civil Protection, the Italian Red Cross, and the Italian Air Force (Air Force Chief of Staff Leonardo Tricarico also attended) for their direct role in arranging the flight. He also extended thanks to the many Italian citizens who have made donations to the Red Cross and other relief organizations. Berlusconi spoke at length and emphasized that Italy was prepared to provide additional disaster relief, if needed. The Prime Minister also made reference to the United States' assistance to Italy during the post-war period.

¶5. (SBU) All major Italian TV newscasts covered the event the same day by headlining the U.S. expression of appreciation. Next-day coverage in major dailies was dominated by Berlusconi's and Letta's statements and by analysis of the presence of Italian Red Cross Director Maurizio Scelli, a Berlusconi protege who was publicly rehabilitated at the event after embarrassing the government with revelations about Iraq hostage negotiations and ransoming.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: We were pleasantly surprised by the high-level of attention the Ambassador's thank-you visit received, even at a time when Katrina was fading from Italian headlines. Having endured much criticism for his support of the United States, particularly in Iraq, Berlusconi seemed eager to participate in an essentially non-political "feel-good" event that emphasized the historic friendship and good will between the United States and Italy. End comment.
SPOGLI

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